

Exploring the restorative benefits and outcomes of spiritual retreats

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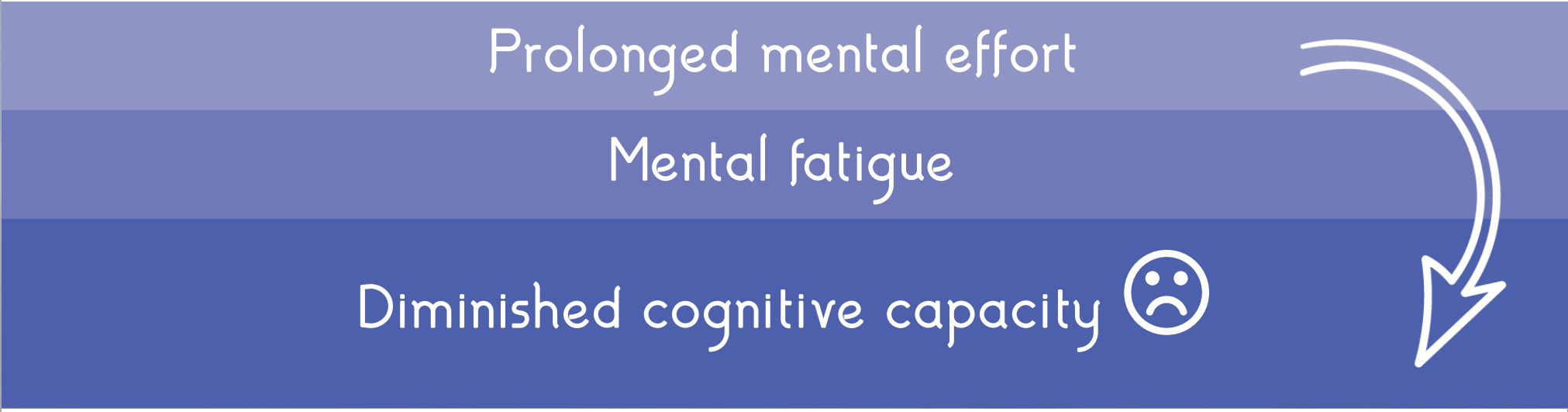
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EXPLORING THE RESTORATIVE EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF SPIRITUAL RETREATS

1 PRIOR RESEARCH

Theoretical framework: Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) attempts to explain the process by which physical, psychological and social capabilities can be replenished after depletion due to prolonged mental effort. The framework has been widely used to explore restorative benefits and experiences in contexts such as natural environments, monasteries, museums, vacations and workplaces.



A retreat is “a place for quiet reflection and rejuvenation, an opportunity to regain good health, and/or it can mean a time for spiritual reassessment and renewal, either alone, in silence or in a group” (Retreats Online, 2007, as cited in Kelly, 2010, p.109). Spiritual retreats are often considered as places to recover and could be considered as a well-being intervention.

2 RESEARCH CONTEXT & METHOD

My research: Mixed methods explanatory design (questionnaires at 3 points in time & follow-up interviews).

17 spiritual retreats across 4 Christian denominations: Participants were clergy attending retreats organised by their denominations.

TIME 1	TIME 2	TIME 3
1 week before retreat 1st questionnaire n=255	At end of retreat 2nd questionnaire n=272	2 weeks after retreat 3rd questionnaire n=181

Two types of retreat:

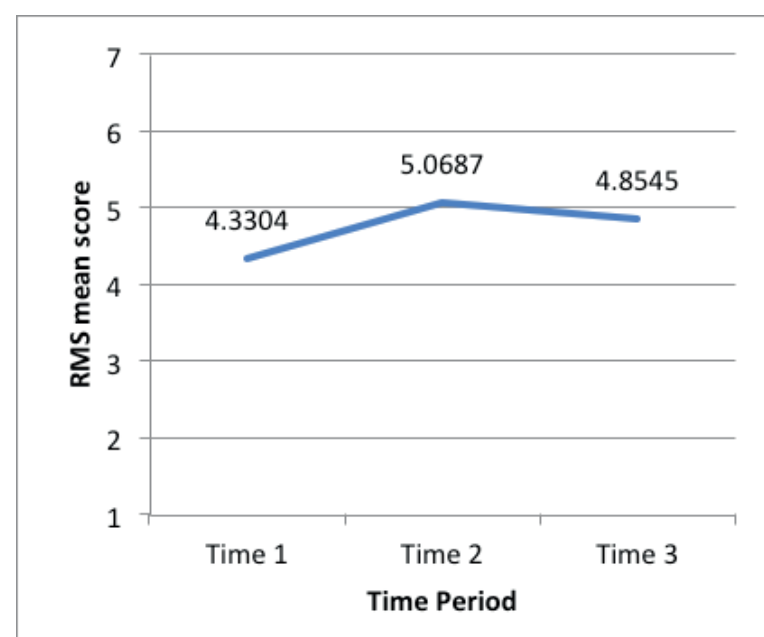
Reflective retreats (RR) provided at least 3 hours per day of quiet time when participants were encouraged to privately reflect (n=10). Some were silent reflective retreats (SRR) n=4, while others imposed no or limited expectations regarding silence (non-silent reflective retreats NSRR) n=6.

Educational retreats (ER) were more focussed on imparting information to help participants develop professionally, personally, emotionally, mentally or spiritually (n=7).

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS & KEY FINDINGS

RQ1: Does a spiritual retreat have a measurable and durable impact on participants' mental state?

RMS: Relaxed Mental State Scale measures an individual's level of relaxation as opposed to mental fatigue (6 items scored positively: feeling refreshed, calm, thoughtful, tranquil, alert, positive; and 3 items scored in reverse: worn out, passive, sleepy). Rating scale 1=not at all, 7=completely.

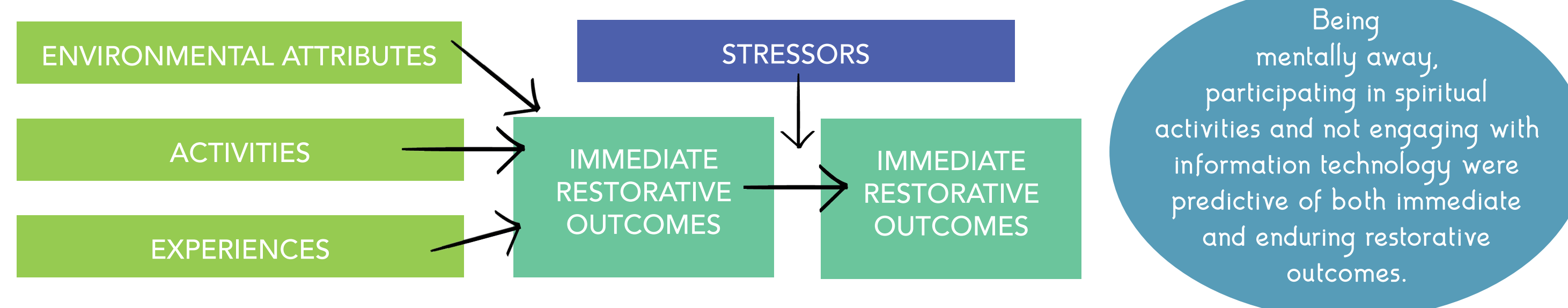


Time Period	RMS mean score
Time 1	4.3304
Time 2	5.0687
Time 3	4.8545

Yes!
Even though RMS scores decreased slightly after the retreat, they were still significantly higher than before the retreat.

RQ4: What factors of spiritual retreats lead to immediate and enduring restorative outcomes?

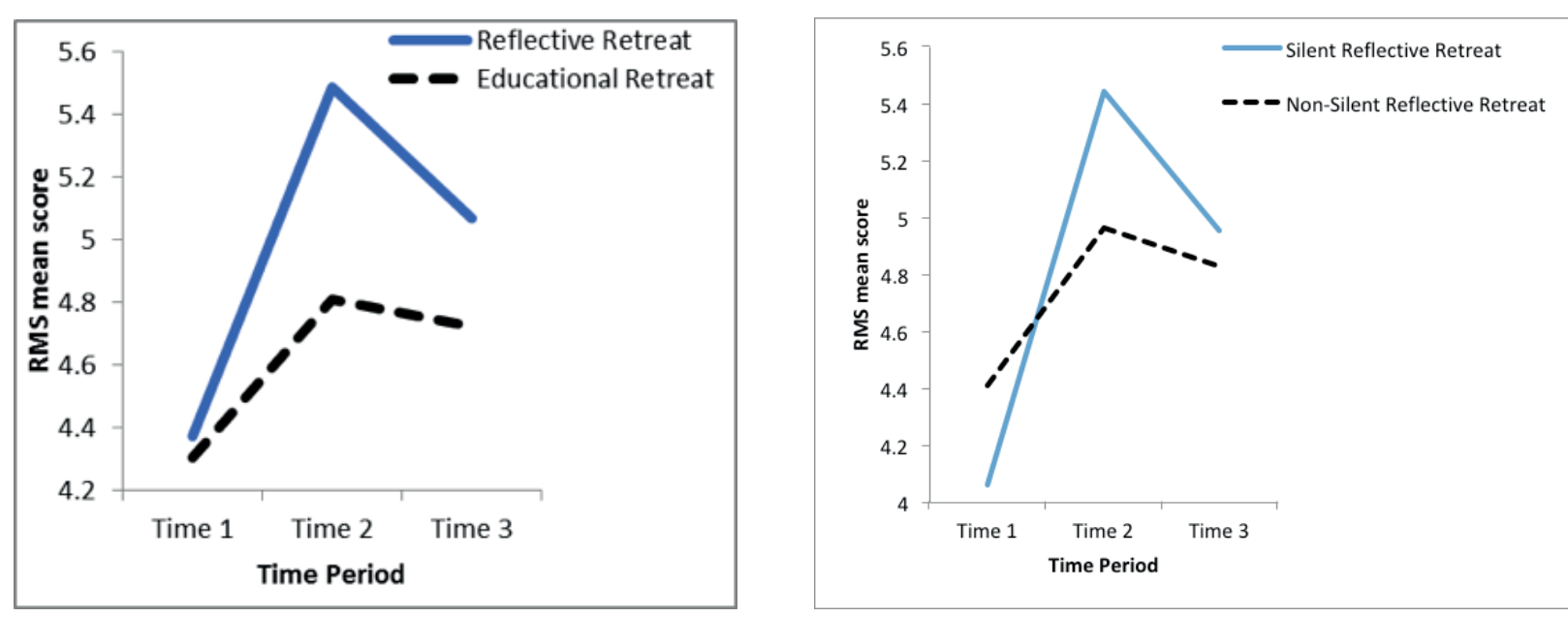
Being mentally away, participating in spiritual activities and not engaging with information technology were predictive of both immediate and enduring restorative outcomes. The strongest predictors of immediate restorative outcomes were fascination, participating in spiritual, reflective and relaxation activities and experiencing a peaceful venue. The strongest predictors of enduring restorative outcomes were compatibility, participating in social activities and experiencing personal growth from the teaching sessions.



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graph LR; EA[ENVIRONMENTAL ATTRIBUTES] --> IRO[IMMEDIATE RESTORATIVE OUTCOMES]; A[ACTIVITIES] --> IRO; EXP[EXPERIENCES] --> IRO; IRO --> ERO[ENDURING RESTORATIVE OUTCOMES]; S[STRESSORS] --> ERO; BMA((Being mentally away, participating in spiritual activities and not engaging with information technology were predictive of both immediate and enduring restorative outcomes.))
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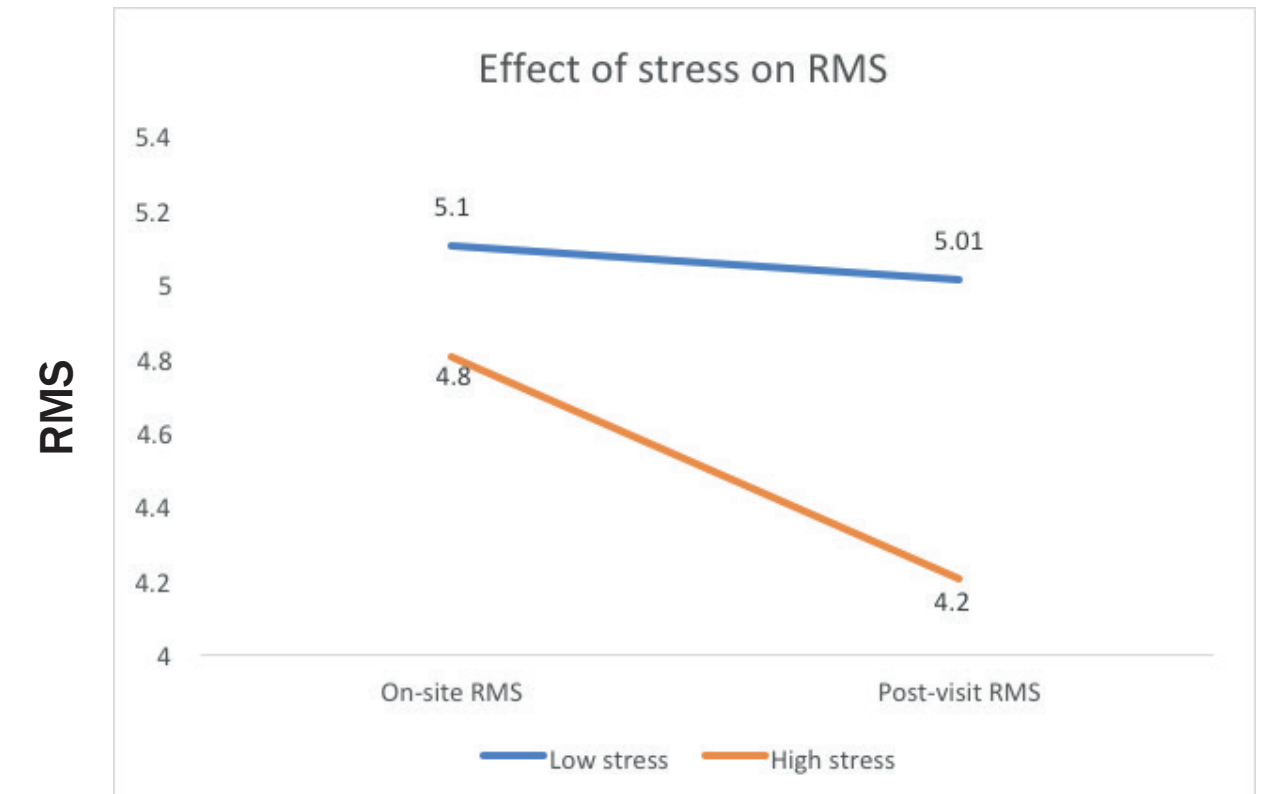
RQ2: Do different types of retreats elicit different restorative outcomes?

Reflective retreat attendees reported higher perceived benefits on all subscales: spiritual, social, personal growth, learning and restorative benefits.



Yes!
A reflective retreat is more restorative than an educational retreat. Participants at silent reflective retreats reported higher RMS scores onsite than those at non-silent retreats, but this advantage was not maintained after the retreat.

RQ5: Does the effect of stress after retreat impact on the persistence of restorative outcomes?



Stress Level	On-site RMS	Post-visit RMS
Low stress	5.1	5.01
High stress	4.8	4.2

Yes!
If you are experiencing low-stress, a spiritual retreat is likely to provide a restorative experience with only a minor decrease in RMS two weeks later. But if you are highly stressed at work, the restorative benefits gained at retreat will decline more quickly!

RQ3: How do participants perceive the unfolding of the restorative process during the retreat?

Qualitative data provided support for Kaplan & Kaplan's (1989) four-step process:

- 1 CLEARING THE MIND**
"It takes a while just to calm down. You're rushing for all this time and then all of a sudden you stop. You've got to get rid of all that excess adrenaline and just breathe, and that takes at least 24 hours."
- 2 RECOVERY OF DIRECTED ATTENTION**
"There's a strong sense of reality without static - not the noise going on. And the pace that I'm going at slows down and a certain clarity of where I've come from and where I'm going, but there's a sense that I'm able to move forward easier because I've left the past behind."
- 3 REFLECTING ON IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS**
"Because it was a different situation [to normal environment] I didn't need to reflect on the things of business, I could reflect on the things of God - it took primary place."
- 4 REFLECTING ON PRIORITIES AND THE FUTURE**
"It's really about coming back to base all the time. I see a retreat as being a chance to get re-centred, and to look at strategies for when you're back to keep that more in place where it's fallen away over the past 12 months for this or that reason."

The retreat is a time for fresh perspectives, re-orienting and refocusing, moving forward in a more positive state of mind.

"Restore, revive, revitalize would be words that I would use. Reorienting would be what I would say ...restoring at times can have a sense of loss or depletion. If you're restoring a painting, the dirt would have to be taken off, so there would be something of that process going on in the annual retreat."

"I don't know why it's called retreat, why it's not called advance, because it's a moving forward."

4 SO WHAT? MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- Recommendations for retreat facilitators / owners:
- » Retreat centre should be situated within a scenic, quiet, natural setting
 - » Encourage attendees to disconnect from information technology and work responsibilities
 - » Create opportunities for at least 3 hours of relaxation and reflection each day
 - » Do not provide too much input / content that requires attendees' focussed attention
 - » Offer retreats for like-minded attendees or those in similar professional roles
 - » Promote the many benefits gained from a retreat experience (restorative, social, learning, spiritual and personal growth)

Reference List:

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